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ABSTRACT

This qualitative investigation studies the impact of belonging to a high school Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA or Alliance) on the lives of seven students in a Salt Lake City (Utah) high school. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted over a 2-year period. The researcher/author used voices of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and straight students to relate the experiences unique to each participant. In addition, data from media and spoken transcripts, video tapes of news reports, grade records, and the GSA advisor's personal observations were analyzed and organized into a framework of seven categories of impact. Results support previous research that Alliances positively impact academic performance, school/social/family relationships, comfort level with sexual orientation, development of strategies to handle assumptions of heterosexuality, sense of physical safety, increased perceived ability to contribute to society, and an enhanced sense of belonging to school community. Implications for educators and questions for further research are included. (Contains 37 references.) (Author/BT)

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The Impact of Belonging to a High School Gay/Straight Alliance

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Camille Lee

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Abstract

This qualitative investigation studies the impact of belonging to a high school Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA or Alliance) on the lives of seven students. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted over a two-year time period. The author used voices of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and straight students to relate the experiences unique to each participant. In addition, data from media and spoken transcripts, video tapes of news reports, grade records, and the GSA advisor's personal observations were analyzed and organized into a framework of seven categories of impact. The results support previous research that Alliances positively impact academic performance, school/social/and family relationships, comfort level with sexual orientation, development of strategies to handle assumptions of heterosexuality, sense of physical safety, increased perceived ability to contribute to society, and an enhanced sense of belonging to school community. Implications for educators and questions for further research are included.

Today's generation of young people are becoming increasingly more aware of and open about their sexual orientation at a younger age. Rofes (1989) suggests that coming out in adolescence is due in part to the "increased visibility of the gay and lesbian movement, but also due to the emerging strength of up front, outspoken young people who are asserting their identities as young gay men and lesbians" (p. 448). Nonetheless, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) youth continue to make up an invisible minority-- invisible because they can't be identified by their race, skin-color, or ethnicity. Even so, what is becoming more apparent is that these youth are not receiving the same educational opportunities as their straight peers. LGBT youth are rarely represented in the educational curriculum, they are at increased risk for verbal harassment and physical abuse, and they are left out of the compulsory heterosexual social activities (e.g., the prom). Many of these students are now seeking help and support within their schools.

Unfortunately, schools have been slow to provide the type of support LGBT youth request and need (Anderson, 1994). Schools can provide support through opportunities for students to form and participate in gay/straight student alliances (GSA's) or other student support groups. (Treadway & Yoakham, 1992). Many American cities are witnessing the formation of such groups (Gerstel, Feraios, & Herdt, 1989). Some of them are community-based, while others are administered in public and private schools. In March 2000, over 700 GSA"s were registered with the National Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) as official student groups.

GSA's can play a major role in the daily lives of LGBT youth by creating a safe arena within which students can develop positive relationships with their peers and build relationships with understanding adult mentors. Because all students are required by law to attend school, their safety must be provided for. "Regardless of the root cause, if gay and lesbian students are being

hurt in public schools, then change must begin there" (Anderson, 1994, p. 21).

Gay/straight groups are important not only in offering support to LGBT students, but also in providing education for straight students. Sanders & Burke (cited in Epstein, 1994) agree, stating, "Discrimination and prejudice not only harm the receiver, they stunt the growth of the giver as well. All too often, people put someone else down to feel good about themselves. This is made easier if they are ignorant about that person or their way of life" (p. 69). Treadway & Yoakam (1992) believe that as students come out at younger ages, schools must create an atmosphere where individual differences are respected and students learn to appreciate diversity Forming gay/straight alliances on high school campuses can be the first step in this process. Not only is there a need to support gay and lesbian students, but also to support children of gay and lesbian parents, and straight students who have gay and lesbian family members (Harbeck, 1994).

Although many GSA's are emerging across the country, little research has been done that evaluates the impact they have on the lives of the individual students who participate in them. This article examines the impact that involvement in a GSA had on seven Salt Lake City students who were pioneers of the first GSA in Utah. This investigation begins to address the gap in the research concerning the following questions regarding the impact of GSA's on the participants' lives. These seven questions are:

1. How does involvement in the Alliance affect academic performance?
2. How does involvement in the Alliance affect relationships with school administrators, teachers, family and peers?
3. Are students more comfortable with being known as gay, lesbian, or bisexual through their involvement in the Alliance?

4. Does involvement in the Alliance provide students with specific strategies for handling society's assumptions of heterosexuality?

5. Do students feel safer attending school due to their involvement in the Alliance?

6. Will students feel that they can "make a difference" or contribute positively to society through their involvement in the Alliance?

7. How has involvement in the Alliance affected the way students identify with their school or feel that they belong?

History

In October of 1995, a small group of students in Salt Lake City, Utah, wanted to start a school sanctioned support group for gay and lesbian students and their straight allies at their high school. These students obtained and completed the application that was required to become an official school club. They drafted a mission statement and bylaws and then found a faculty member to serve as their club sponsor.

The students submitted the completed club application to the principal, who asked for a legal opinion from the Utah Attorney General's Office on the issue of forming a Gay/Straight Alliance. The students and the faculty advisor met peacefully and quietly for the next three months. While waiting for a response, the group continued to grow in strength and numbers and the students gained much faculty and administrative support.

In December the Utah Attorney General's office issued a response stating that the Federal Equal Access Act and case law require that high school clubs be treated equally regardless of their potentially controversial status (Skordas, 1995). At this point, media stories erupted concerning "gay clubs" in public high schools. During the next several weeks, segments of the community began to mobilize "for" and "against" the club. The Alliance became the focus of daily news

stories both locally and nationally.

From 1996-1998 the community, school, and local public officials became embroiled in heated debate over policies regarding the request for consideration as an official high school organization. This study took place during the two years of this community controversy. As a result of this controversy, the Salt Lake City School Board, staying aligned with the provisions of the *Equal Access Act*, voted 4-3 to ban *all* noncurricular clubs from the district, a strategy designed to block gay and lesbian students from having clubs. The measure meant each school administration was required to re-examine all student clubs on its campus, including men's and women's associations, athletic clubs, volunteer councils, peer leadership groups, Kiwanis clubs, sports clubs, human rights groups, environmental, chess and ski clubs.

The day following the school boards' decision, the high school erupted. Approximately seven hundred students walked out of the school to protest the club ban and police were ordered to cordon off the block in front of the school to protect the students from traffic.

The controversy continued throughout the remainder of the 1995/1996 school year.

When students returned to school in September 1996, the list of banned clubs in Utah high schools included the Advancement of Hispanic Students, Bowling Club, Ethnic Alliance, Agro Skating, Organized for Planet Earth, Ski and Board Shafters, Students Against Drunk Driving, Black Student Union, Aztec Club, and the Polynesian Club. In an ironic twist, the original Gay-Straight Alliance continued to meet on campus under the *Civic Center Act*, a federal law allowing any group to rent space in a public facility. Support for the Alliance had grown so strong throughout Salt Lake City that community members completed the massive paperwork required

to rent space under the Act and raised donations to pay the room rental fee.

During the 1996-1997 school year, the Alliance served approximately twenty students. Its members spoke at various community, college, and university functions and on numerous radio talk shows. They received awards from organizations such as Utah NOW (National Organization for Women), the National GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network) chapter, and KRCL, a community radio station.

In spite of the pressures, obstacles and roadblocks, the GSA has continued to meet. The Alliance had been sponsored by the Utah chapter of GLSEN during the past two years. Although the students were allowed to meet after school and on campus, they were frustrated with their status. They simply wanted the same rights and privileges as all other student clubs. In March of 1998, the Alliance filed a federal lawsuit against the Salt Lake City School District in hopes of regaining all student clubs. Attorneys from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, and local private offices formed a team to legally assist the students. This lawsuit was resolved in November of 1999 in favor of Salt Lake City School District. In spite of this decision, the Alliance has continued to grow (approximately 40 students now attending meetings), and the high school has the reputation of being "the place to be" for gay, lesbian , and bisexual students.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were used to examine the effect that a participant's involvement in a GSA had on his or her academic performance, school and personal relationships, comfort level with being "out", sense of physical safety, perceived contribution to society, sense of belonging to their

school community, and strategies for dealing with society's assumptions of heterosexuality. Data was collected through interviews, documents (academic records, and media and audio reports), and the researchers' personal reflections.

Participants

The research participants were seven students who attended a culturally diverse urban high school in Salt Lake City, Utah. These students were all members of the first high school gay/straight alliance in the state. The students were a diverse group. They ranged in age from 15 to 18 years, with both male and female students who self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and or straight. Some of the students had a very high level of involvement with the Alliance, (attended most meetings since the formation of the group, served as group leaders, spoke on panels, at workshops, rallies, etc.), while others had only attended several meetings. All gay or lesbian participants were "out" to their parents, since they were required to have parental permission to participate. The researcher discussed this project with the students at one of their Alliance meetings and invited their participation in the study.

Instrumentation

Several different methods were used for collecting data. A specific interview guide (a structured set of questions) was used for individual interviews with the students. In addition to individual interviews, several of the students participated in a focus group. Documents, such as academic records, media reports, and audio tapes from different speaking engagements were also collected and analyzed. In addition, the researcher maintained a log of thoughts, feelings, and observations throughout the course of the study. A triangulation method was used for data

collection that included individual and focus group interviews, document collection of academic records and media reports, and the researcher's personal reflections. Due to the investigator's close involvement with these youth as advisor of the Gay/Straight Alliance, all interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed by a third party who then provided the data to the investigator.

DISCUSSION

This section presents a discussion and summary of the findings, the limitations of the study, the implications for educators and school policy, and directions for further research.

This study is distinctive and unique in that it specifically addresses the individual impact of belonging to a school based support group (GSA) and does so through student voices.

Key Findings

This study addressed seven research questions that provided insight into the impact that belonging to a Gay/Straight Alliance had on high school students. This section discusses the key findings from each question.

Research Question #1:

How Does Involvement in the Alliance Affect Academic Performance?

The participants believed that their academic performance improved due to their involvement in the Alliance.

This question explores whether or not participation in the Alliance improved the academic performance of the seven participants involved in this study. The following probes were used

during the interview to gain insight into this question: desire to attend class; study habits, interest in course work; interest in school; educational aspirations; and attitudes about school.

Research has consistently documented that gay and lesbian students are more likely than straight students to drop out of high school. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in Brookins-Fisher, 1989) and also more likely to report that their schoolwork is being negatively affected by conflicts around their sexual orientation (Sears, 1991; Hetrick, et al., 1988). One of the more striking aspects of the interviews was the students' *perceived* beliefs about how their academic achievement had improved during the period they were associated with the Alliance, although the data (grade records) did not support these individual beliefs. On the basis of these findings, it appears that "perceived improvement" on the students part leads to overall increased academic achievement. Academic achievement meant more to the students than just "getting good grades." Several students reported that their attendance had improved as a result of their involvement in the Alliance. Keysha felt "more inclined" to go to school because she would get to see her new friends in the Alliance. She expressed a greater desire to attend school. The students were worked harder and had more ambition. Emily, who had come back to high school after dropping out voiced how much harder she was trying. Kelli and Erin both believe that they took school work more seriously and put forth more effort after the formation of the Alliance. Kelli had begun to think about furthering her education and believed that the Alliance was "making [her] work harder in school." Kelli reported that while she was failing most of her classes before joining the Alliance, she spoke of "developing expectations" for herself after she became involved. An interesting finding of the study was that students saw a direct link between

their level of academic performance and their future career goals.

Before the Alliance began, neither Kelli or Jacob had any plans for attending college, but their goals changed over time.

Jacob: "Now (since the Alliance) I want to get through college, that will be easy now."

Several Alliance students noticed that some teachers were paying more attention to them and to their academic success. One student grudgingly stated that the club's (Alliance) advisor checked up on their grades. They acknowledged, however, that having their grades monitored by someone they respected made them work harder. For instance, Sonja said: "it doesn't matter what I get, (the faculty advisor) always says I can get better." Sonja went on to reveal that she had never received that type of attention and concern from a teacher before. Although she had to work harder, she "liked it." The students also believed that their grades were improving at the time of the interviews.

Several GSA students were invited to speak to the Board of Directors for The Council For Exceptional Children that met in April 1997. They were considering making a revision to their by laws that included "sexual orientation" in their commitment to diversity statement. During her testimony Kelli reflected on her experience:

> *Hi!, I'm Kelli Peterson. I founded the group at East High School when it was in its beginning stages. The group for me meant a great deal of empowerment. I faced a lot of harassment being one of the only "out" students at East High School before the club. And I was terrified to go to school. I avoided going to school. I failed most of my classes my freshman through junior year. My senior year I attended regularly and held down the best GPA I've had since I've been in school.*

Jacob also participated in this presentation and reported: "I'm doing great in school now." Nate felt that he had experienced a dramatic shift in his grades. When asked if he could explain the

shift he replied:

> *When I first got to (East High School) I was doing my work and getting straight 'A's. And then slowly it was like, well you know, I can't do anything. Something would happen and I would go, 'well that's stupid and I don't want that to happen and (the school personnel) would say, 'well tough luck, you are just a student; you are just a sophomore. You aren't on the Senate, you aren't on the Board of Control, you're not in that group of kids so you have no power.' And a lot of kids respond to that by just either not caring or numbing themselves to that, but other kids rebel. They go across the street and smoke pot, act tough, and look dramatically different by dressing differently. So, I just didn't care about school. When I got involved with the Alliance, I did. I felt more empowered. I said, 'hey wow, I made a difference, I know how.' I did it and saw that I can make a difference in my own life too. I felt like I was being swept away by the school system. But the GSA gave me that one little twig on the side of the river that if you grab on to and resist the current of me just being swept along. My grades didn't go down anymore, they have gone up.*

Nate also tried to explain the relationship between his involvement in the Alliance and his grade point average:

> *You'll see the change on my transcript. You'll see my first year (sophomore year). I got straight A's and a B. It slipped slowly from there. Slowly my grades started failing until the first trimester of this year. I got two F's and D and a "no" grade. But if you get my transcript of this year, this trimester, they are dramatically different. I'm getting A's again and I'm no longer satisfied with a B.*

Most importantly, each of the participants expressed an overall feeling of "a sense of hope" for their academic future. Although Emily had been in an out of school over the past few years and was behind in credits, she felt that she was "back for good now." She very much wanted to graduate and truly believed that she could. Jacob expressed a goal of finally having something to work for:

> *It makes me think, 'yeah, I can do this.' Before, my mom would say, can't you get better than a B?" And I'd say, 'Well, I'll try to get an A.' But that phased off me by the next morning. But with the Alliance (and the faculty advisor) now I feel I have something to work for.*

Research Question #2:

How Does Involvement in the Alliance Affect Relationships with School Administrators, Teachers, Family and Peers?

The participants believed that their involvement in the Alliance positively affected relationships with school administrators, teachers, family and peers.

This question was designed to explore how participation in the Alliance may affect a wide variety of relationships in the participants lives. Question probes asked students to look at issues like conflicts, strengths, attitudes towards people, and any differences noticed.

Many gay youth struggle to form relationships with their families and their peers. Due to the invisibility of their lives, gay youth often fail to develop close relationships. The invisibility precludes a positive, honest relationship with their heterosexual teachers, families, and peers in discussing friends, sexuality, and relationships (Hetrick & Martin, cited in Telljohann & Price , 1993; Hunter & Schaecher, 1978). As the participants in this study became involved in the Alliance, they also became more visible. They became more honest with themselves and others and formed a peer group. Erin also felt the barriers between herself and her classmates begin to crumble. In contrast to the isolation many gay youth experience, Erin gained a sense of "self identification" from her membership in the Alliance which enabled her to identify more easily with other classmates. This experience was represented in the following statement:

> *I feel more willing to identify with a diversity of people at school. Now I feel rooted in who I am. I can go talk to other people. I don't need to wimp out. I don't need to be part of this vast subculture. I can go talk to someone who is blonde, blue-eyed, Mormon, and wears dresses. Before (the Alliance) I usually felt there was a barrier between us. Now I am more secure with myself and have social identification.*

Jacob also felt his felt his comfort level and ability for interaction with others had improved. He

talked about that transformation with a lot of hope and excitement:

> *This year, early on, I decided that I was going to come to school and not talk to anyone; not see anyone; just go to school. It had been awful before when I didn't do that. And then, someone said there was going to be a meeting in Camille's room for organizing a GSA and I went to it. I came out feeling like 'I can do this!' (see and talk to people). I was really happy!.*

Several students spoke of the new friendships they had gained. They believed these new relationships were a direct result of their participation in the Alliance. When Keysha first came to the GSA she had very few friends, but that changed quickly. During the presentation to the Board of Governors of The Council for Exceptional Children, Keysha shared her experiences of making new friends and the meaning of those friendships.

> *The GSA has changed my life immensely. I began going to meetings at the beginning of this year, and since then I've made a lot of new friends (I think this is probably the most friends I've ever had at one point in time) and I feel a lot better about myself. I have a much higher self esteem. These students that are a part of the club now are some of my best friends, and I hang out with them all the time. Before (the Alliance) I was really cautious about what people were thinking of me and now that I have all these new friends it's like I don't care. They like me for who I am. I'm glad that I have this group.*

The students sensed an overwhelming amount of support in forming different relationships with school administrators, teachers, family members and peers. They were able to develop positive relationships with their peers and form a connection with adult mentors. They continually talked of an increased ability to get along with other people. They formed alliances with the school principal and other administrators. Many of their teachers and heterosexual friends gained respect for them. They also talked about improved relationships at home and of building "family unity."

The eight participants came from a wide variety of family situations. Although all students

were "out" to their parents, a varying degree of support from them existed. As participants were asked about the effect their membership in the Alliance had on their family relationships, most talked specifically about their parents. There was a unanimous reporting of increased acceptance and support from their families. Both Keysha's and Nate's parents were proud of them for doing something that they strongly believed in. Their parents stood behind them and supported them. Erin's family not only supported her but also became involved in the fight for the inclusion of the GSA into the school. The overriding theme of all of their statements was summarized by Jacob when he said that the relationships he had formed since joining the Alliance had given him "the strength to carry on."

Research Question #3 :

Are Students More Comfortable with Being Known as Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual, Through Their Involvement in the Alliance?

The student participants became more comfortable with being known as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or as a heterosexual ally through their involvement in the Alliance.

This question asks the participants what effect their membership in the GSA had on their comfort level with claiming a label of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or as a heterosexual ally. The following probes were used as students were asked to reflect on their experiences: coming out issues; feelings about being labeled; feelings about being a heterosexual ally.

Research shows that the negative and self-defeating feelings that many young gays and lesbians feel are not a result of identification as lesbian or gay, but of hostile and inappropriate responses by others to that identification (Rogers, cited in Epstein, 1994). These researchers propose that

support groups for gay youth are important in countering some of the negative hostility.

The participants unanimously agreed that having a support group made the transition of "coming out" easier. (Whether they were gay or straight) Hetrick & Martin cited in Schneider, (1989) claim that young gay people are learning how to hide rather than learning how to socialize like their heterosexual counterparts. The young people in this study were beginning to come out of hiding. The students felt much more comfortable identifying with a label of gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual ally as they became more open and more secure in who they were. Their confidence surrounding their sexuality increased and they were willing to defend it. Emily talked of being comfortable in defending who she was:

> *I have become really secure in defending who I am -- really secure. There is a point when you become aware of who you are, the point that it (being gay) is OK and then you start defending yourself because you're comfortable with it and you defend it.*

Being a member of the GSA brought much "relief" to most of the students because they no longer had to "pass" as heterosexual.

> *Jacob: I spent most of my time trying to pass as a heterosexual because everyone already assumed that I was gay. I was trying to get people to think of me differently. I've lived with that all my life. Now I don't have to do that. I can just be myself now in school instead of trying to lie and hide. It hurts so much inside trying to be someone you're not. I'm really happy that I don't have to lie anymore about who I am.*

They were finally able to be honest with themselves and others:

> *Kelli: I used to spend most of my time trying to fit in, passing as heterosexual. I'd do the "right" stuff ; makeup, long hair, talk to boys. Anything so that no one would know that I was a lesbian. It's different now with the Alliance around. I don't need to do that anymore.*

Most significantly, the participants developed a sense of pride and were no longer ashamed of who they were.

Jacob spoke with conviction about the pride he felt in himself. He had gained self acceptance and no longer had to feel ashamed.

> *When I was introduced to this club when it first started, it helped me a lot to understand who I was and it made me accept myself and be proud of who I am. And this is a BIG change. I used to feel ashamed of who I was. Now I am proud.*

Several of the students shared stories of feeling more confident and secure about identifying with a label of gay, lesbian, or bisexual after they became involved in the Alliance. Erin was asked how it had been to be on campus with such controversy surrounding the Alliance. She answered, saying she was "relieved" and that she felt a lot of "freedom:" Sonja spoke of feeling "empowered" and "confident" about her sexuality.

Research Question #4

Does Involvement in the Alliance Provide Students with Specific Strategies for Handling Society's Assumptions of Heterosexuality?

Students were aware that they were living and going to school in a heterosexist society but were not consciously able to identify specific strategies they used for handling the heterosexist assumptions.

For the majority of students in our schools, heterosexuality is as compulsory as math and science. Heterosexuality is considered to be the norm and any variation from it is seen as deviant, abnormal, and usually unacceptable. The following probes were used in exploring this question: how do you experience heterosexuality in school; in what ways you have typically dealt with it; in what ways you would now want to deal with it; have your attitudes or beliefs changed about how you might act in a heterosexist society related to your association to the Alliance and why.

Although the students were aware of the heterosexism and could relate specific examples of it, they were not able to identify specific ways in which they were able to handle, resist, or deal with the heterosexual assumptions.

> *Jacob: There is always the assumption that you are going to take your girlfriend to the dances. Everyone talks about their dates for weeks, but I can't say I'm going to take my boyfriend.*
>
> *Kelli: Teachers are always making comments about "taking their wives someplace" or "what they did with their husbands" over the weekend. They always talk about someone of the opposite sex. And so do the students. All their interactions are about someone of the opposite sex. It makes you really uncomfortable to talk about your same-sex interest. You just don't do it.*
>
> *Erin: Heterosexism is everywhere. I see it everyday in everything I do. How people talk to me, what they assume. We are nowhere in textbooks, and there is nothing in the school to suggest that we exist. I started noticing this when I came out. At that time I realized there was nowhere I could go for support or anyone I could talk to.*

However, the advisor observed that they were dealing with heterosexuality in many ways that they did not recognize. Their methods are interwoven throughout the stories they have told in the seven categories of impact. For example, before the Alliance, many of them remained invisible in order to deal with society's assumptions of heterosexuality. Starting a GSA in itself was a strategy. This question alone could provide the basis for an additional research project.

Research Question #5 :

Do Students Feel Safer Attending School Due to Their Involvement in the Alliance?

Students felt safer and believed they were harassed less due to their involvement in the Alliance.

This research question examines if students feel safer attending school due to their

participation in the Alliance . Students were asked questions about physical safety, verbal harassment, walking alone, comfort level at school, amount of fear, etc.

Many statistics have been gathered that show that schools are unsafe places for gay youth. Hunter (1990) reported that, of 500 self-identified gay and lesbian youth in her study, forty percent had experienced violent attacks (forty-six percent said that the violence was gay- related, and sixty-one percent of the gay-related violence occurred in the family). The U.S. Justice Department reported in 1987 that homosexuals, compared to all other minority groups, are the most frequent victims of hate crimes (in Brookins-Fisher, 1995). The student participants in this research project were not exempt to this hatred. By the time Kelli was a freshman in high school the names 'butch, queer, dyke, and faggot' were attached to her. Kelli relates two incidents that she experienced before she was involved in the Alliance. Both happened in a gym class. The first consisted of a group of girls who decided they did not like the way Kelli looked. They grabbed her from behind and beat her as she was getting dressed in the locker room. The second time the same group knocked her to the ground while playing field hockey. They "high-sticked" her in the face with hockey sticks. Kelli readily admits that during this time she avoided school whenever possible because she didn't "feel safe."

Treadway and Yoakham (1992) suggest that GSA's in schools create safer environments for gay and lesbian students. They believe that school support groups can be "life saving" for youth by providing them with a safe place to meet other youth like themselves. The results of this study are consistent with this hypothesis. The students related many stories about feeling safer since becoming involved in the Alliance. The level of fear greatly decreased as they built a "network of

power." The students felt "safety in numbers" and reported less name calling and no physical attacks. Soon after the formation of the Alliance the students began to feel the protection that comes from "safety in numbers." Both Erin and Emily experienced this phenomena:

> *Erin: I feel safer. People kind of jump when they see us right after they have said something incredibly homophobic. So I'm sure they are a lot more intimidated by the idea of actually hurting us. But I personally feel a lot less scared, because of the group. Because we have numbers now. Because we are seen and because we are visible.*
>
> *Erin: I think it (increased safety) probably has a lot to do with them seeing us as being really covered by the administration and by teachers. They know we have a faculty sponsor and they know that the principal checks up on us often, so I'm sure they see us as being out of their jurisdiction. We have a network of power.*
>
> *Emily: I think everyone feels safer. I can't think of anyone in the group that's really afraid anymore.*

Of all the student participants, Jacob talked most about the decreased verbal harassment. In response to a question directed to the 1997 GLSEN National Conference student panel in which he participated, he discussed how the homophobic slurs had "dramastically decreased". He felt comfortable leaving the "doors open" at GSA because "now, nobody comes by and yells "fag" or anything." He said that he had not experienced any name calling at all this year. He felt much more comfortable in his classes and "can act any way I want and no longer gets harassed."

Research Question #6 :

Will Students Feel That They Can "Make a Difference" or Contribute Positively to Society Through Their Involvement in the Alliance?

The participants gained a new sense that they could "make a difference" or contribute positively to society through their involvement in the Alliance.

This question addresses the impact that the participants felt they could make in society, in spite

of the hostility they experienced at school.

Gay youth face numerous obstacles growing up in this society (Massachusetts Governors Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993). The problems that they encounter are not "caused by their sexual orientation, but by society's extremely negative reaction to it" (Savin-Williams, 1994 p.261). The students in this study received hostile responses to their request to form a GSA, yet they acted in spite of this hostility. Through their involvement with the Alliance they gained a sense of personal power, and they learned they could be agents of change. Most of the students voiced a strong belief that they had the ability to "make a difference" in the world. Nate commented on the "great gratification" he received from his work in the Alliance and Kelli spoke with confidence concerning the consequences of her actions. Much hope echoed from their words as they spoke of the changes they perceived to be making:

> *Nate: I have always sort of wondered what I am going to do with my life, am I going to make my mark? I know that I have. I am satisfied now. If I can make another one... great. But if this is it... its just fine.*

> *Kelli: My senior year I decided that I was going to make a difference. I didn't want anyone to suffer the way I had. I feel a lot more confident about myself now. I know I can be a leader now and I like that. I feel I can make an impact and do a good job.*

Sonja recognized that the GSA had already made a difference in the lives of several students.

> *Just being organized and actually going out there and doing something ... it feels good. Just to be able to make a difference. It feels so amazing. I mean we have already made a difference. We convinced two dropouts to come back to school*

Two students expressed their "new found power" as they spoke to different groups of people at the height of the "gay clubs" controversy. Erin had the opportunity to be a participant on a panel discussion at the 1996 Family Fellowship Conference on Homosexuality. Kelli's words come

from a speech she gave at a rally at the State Capitol building during the 1996 legislative session.

> *Erin: It's taking a stand. It's making like, yeah, I'm taking part. I'm making a difference. I'm doing this thing and I've really loved it. Knowing that I'm part of it and I'm somehow helping the entire society move forward in the fight for liberation and equality. So yeah! It's been such a high.*
>
> *Kelli: Our legislative leaders cannot deny us our rights simply because we are gay, lesbian, bisexual or support the cause. It's not OK to treat us like this simply because we are under 18. I'd like to remind everybody that is in office right now, that is in this legislative house, that we are going to be 18 pretty soon. We will be able to vote and don't think we're going to forget what you did to us.*

Other students believed that they finally had "something to give" to society in a way that they never had before. Emily was surprised and excited that "a lot of younger kids look up to me now." She had never imagined herself being a role model. Erin found a new sense of "community" due to her work with the Alliance.

> *The GSA has helped me feel more a part of my community, both the gay community and the American community at large. I feel like I can go and volunteer. That I have something I can give the world ... whereas before I didn't even bother.*

Jacob had just been elected as the student representative on the HIV Prevention Community Planning Committee for the Utah Department of Health. He was "really proud of that" and took this position very seriously. Erin said that her parents used to complain that she "didn't ever really do anything." She came from a family of achievers and didn't feel like she was "measuring up." But after she became involved in the GSA, she said that her parents "now have something to write about." With much enthusiasm and pride Erin stated " I AM doing something now."

Before Nate was involved in the Alliance he felt like he didn't have any power in his school. He felt victimized and lacked agency. His feelings of powerlessness changed after he started participating in the GSA. He then felt that he had "the ability to make change and impact

decisions made in the school." He believed that he became more "empowered" and saw this happen through his emerging self-gratification and school spirit.

> *Yeah, it has made me feel... well, before I felt like I didn't have any power in the school system and that I was just being swept along. But now I feel like I'm more in control and know I can change what's going on. The knowledge that I can change something and push something through school that I want to happen, even if people in charge don't want it to happen. But knowing that I can push makes me feel great. That I can get it done, that I have power. And that's what they always say, you know, "this is your school," and I always took it with a grain of salt. Like ... OK.. Big deal, it's my school but there are all of these policies that I don't like. But now I see that I can change policies. I can change the status quo.*

They began to understand that their personal troubles were linked to cultural and societal beliefs and attitudes. All of the participants believed they had the power to "make a difference" and "give something to the world." Most had an inner sense of knowing that they had already made positive change.

Research Question #7 :

How Has Involvement in the Alliance Affected the Way Students Identify with Their School or Feel That They Belong?

Involvement in the Alliance gave students an avenue for feeling a "sense of belonging to," and "identification with" the school.

This question addresses how students identify with their school and whether or not they had felt an increased sense of belonging to their school community. The following probes were used in the interviews to gain insight into the question: changes in relationships within the school that may have taken place; identification with the school; desire to be known as a students from that

school; attitude about daily life at school. Most gay youth feel completely alone and believe they are the only ones in their entire school who are gay. Hetrick and Martin (cited in Brookins-Fisher, 1995) note that "the most common problem homosexual adolescents face as a rejected minority is isolation (social, emotional, and cognitive)" (p. 5). Before joining the Alliance, most of the participants felt isolated. As a result of forming the GSA, the students started to feel "a part of" rather than "a part from." They felt a sense of belonging to the greater whole of humankind, and they no longer felt out of place. A greater sense of caring, respect, and pride for their school also developed. Nate believed that his sense of "school spirit" emerged when he found a way to make "positive changes" in his school. He noted that his Alliance affiliation provided him with more school pride "just because there is a piece of me in the school--a piece of my ideas are there."

As well as having a safe and comfortable peer group within which to discuss issues and feel a part, the Alliance also provided Erin with a new appreciation of, and connection with, the school's other clubs.

> *The pep club, school mascot, and school colors used to seem really foolish to me. I couldn't see why anyone would care about such stuff. But now that I have actually tried to change (the school) I see a lot of the goings on at a more involved level, a deeper level. (Other students) do have a reason to care for this school because they work for it, they actually try for it. And the football team has every reason in the world to have spirit because they get out there and they work everyday to make themselves and their school look good. And in the same sense I am doing the same thing.*

Both Jacob and Keysha spoke out publicly in regard to their new found sense of belonging. Keysha was invited to share her feelings from the Statehouse steps in Boston, Massachusetts at the 1997 Boston Gay/Straight Youth Pride Day.

> *Being a member of this group motivates me to come to school because I no longer feel out of place. I think being a member of any club gives a teen a sense of belonging.*

Jacob made his feelings very clear when speaking to the media about the Salt Lake School District club ban and student walkout in 1996.

> *To me, taking our clubs from us is like putting a gun in our hands and waiting for us to pull the trigger. How many times do we have to walk out of our schools before we are heard? In high school our community clubs give us a feeling of belonging. We need to take a stand and get our clubs back.*

When Sonja was asked to discuss the effect the Alliance had on her sense of belonging to the school, she chose to relate a dream that signified her hope for a better future.

> *I had a dream about the Gay/Straight Alliance. This was so fun. We ran up and down the halls of our new building. We painted rainbows, the entire hall was just this big rainbow. And there were people walking down the halls and you always saw heterosexual couples hugging on each other. And in my dream there were these two guys and they were just ... holding hands and one of them was about to go into a classroom. Then they just gave each other a big kiss. Someone said "oh my gosh, that is so gross." And the guy who said that was walking next to me and I said, "why are you such an asshole" and then just walked away from him. Everyone else in the hall turned to him and said, "ha, ha, ha, homophobe." And it was the best dream because for once the people who are trying to be bigots were being called on it.*

Conclusion

Anderson (1994) categorizes gay youth as an "at risk" population. He believes that school-based support groups can help to counter the negative statistics in the lives of gay youth (homelessness, high school dropouts, drug and alcohol abuse, victims of physical violence, suicide). Although these statistics are a reality for many gay youth and provide a compelling justification for school supported GSA's, the results of this study seem to paint a different portrait of the lives of the young people with whom the investigator worked. The participants in this

study experienced some of the hopelessness and despair common to gay youth, but they also became empowered young people through their association with the GSA. Being a part of the GSA helped them to move beyond the depressing statistics and gain stronger identities. Their new identities were expressed in their educational lives as well as their personal and social lives. They came to learn that many of their perceived problems were really society's problems, not theirs. School no longer was a place to avoid, but a place to challenge the heterosexism that they encountered daily. They became empowered by working toward a collective goal: challenging the system in which they previously believed they could not have an impact. In taking action, the students were empowered, not just through "doing" but also by "being" (Mayberry, 1998). The results of this study suggest a positive justification for GSA's. It also suggests that educational policy makers must look beyond the statistics of gay youth and recognize the positive impact that belonging to a GSA can have on students.

Limitations of the Study

The lack of diversity of the participants, the small size of the sample, and the specific time period in which the study was conducted limited this research study. Although the participants adequately represented the specific GSA that was being studied, they do not represent all GSA's across the country. Therefore, the findings from this study may not be generalizable to all students in all GSA's. The results would have been more useful had the researcher involved a wider variety of participants (i.e., students of color, students from a lower socioeconomic class, and students from other states and communities). This scope would have provided significant information on how race, class, and geographical/cultural locations impact a sense of belonging to

a high school GSA.

The size of the sample was limited in that the voices of only seven students were represented. However, this did provide the opportunity for greater depth into the personal experiences of each student than would have occurred with a larger sample.

Another significant limitation to this study was that it covered only two years of these students high school careers. A follow-up study of these participants might determine if their involvement in a GSA was significant over time.

One cannot know whether or not the hostile community climate in which this study was conducted limited or enhanced the results of this study. The participants were a group of students who were deeply affected by both the negative and positive reactions from their school and community which they received as they created the GSA. They were a unique group in that they became worldwide media icons and political pawns for the local school board and the Utah state legislature.

Finally, this was a group of pioneers who were making an initial attempt at forming a GSA. Most of the students involved in the GSA during this study were considered to be "fringe kids" in the typical high school community. Since the study a shift has occurred in the make up of the membership of the GSA in that the members currently fit more into the "mainstream' high school culture (sterling scholars, varsity cheerleaders, club presidents, athletes, honor students). This research may or may not have different results if conducted at the present time.

Implications

The practical implications of these findings for educators, policy makers, and community members are

significant. These data, along with those from related studies (Treadway & Yoakham, 1992), point to a dramatic need for school based support groups such as GSA's in all high schools. The analysis has shown that gay students thrive when they receive support. Joining a group that is unified in purpose and in action can soothe the individual isolation that many gay youth face. Another pressing need for significant change is in educational harassment and anti-discrimination policies. Policies must state clearly that all students will be safe and welcome in a school and that severe consequences exist for harassment. A related need is for school-wide education about the lives of gay and lesbian people. Whether this is done in assemblies, awareness days, or during Gay and Lesbian History Month, it is imperative that all students be educated about gay and lesbian people. Once the dialogue starts, change can begin.

Questions for Further Research

GSA's are a relatively new concept and we have much yet to learn about the impact they have on high school students. Studying the following questions could provide more insight into their significance.

1. Does involvement in a GSA significantly affect students' lives over a longer period of time?
2. Are students in other states and communities impacted by their participation in GSA's in the same ways as the students in Utah?
3. How do students handle, resist and deal with heterosexist high schools?
4. Are students who are allowed to form school-supported GSA's impacted in the same ways as students who are denied access to school support?
5. Do students become empowered through their participation in GSA's?

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